

Activist, Advocate, Comrade

A prominent leader of India's fishworkers succumbed to COVID-19 on 8 October. T Peter was a committed organizer and a practical leader with exemplary political acumen

T Peter, the General Secretary of the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF), India, passed away on 8 October, 2020. About a week earlier, on 2 October, Peter had led a protest at sea in Kollam (Quilon), Kerala, against a shipping corridor routed through the famous 'Quilon bank', a rich fishing ground falling between the 200-metre and 500-metre depth lines. He was unaware that he had already contracted the virus. He returned home to Thiruvananthapuram and his busy routines, ignoring the tell-

of good fish catches. When fish was plentiful, Veli would bustle in a festive atmosphere. Peter's eyes would light up when he talked about helping the fishermen remove fish from the nets, playing hide-and-seek amidst the fishing boats beached on the shore and, above all, the joys of a large extended family full of cousins to play and quarrel with.

His parents chose to get Peter educated rather than follow the traditional occupation. Although he barely managed to scrape through school, the education gave him a foundation. In the late 1970s, when Peter was looking around for suitable career options, most of his contemporaries in Veli with a semblance of an education joined the 'Gulf rush'—the mass migration to the oil-rich countries of the Western Asia—as did most of Kerala's unskilled workers. Peter had several cousins to ease his path there. But something held him back from the conveyor belt to the Gulf countries.

He cut his leadership teeth in his community. At age 21, he became the secretary of a trade union of small-time, casual labour in Veli working in the nearby campus of the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO). Being part of the 'affected area' of the space centre, Veli was seen as a potential source of trouble. It was hence pacified with jobs. But the low level of educational qualifications meant that these were mostly menial jobs. Peter's union did its best to extract job opportunities and other benefits there for the local community.

It was around this time that the fishermen of Trivandrum district were in ferment; bottom trawlers—introduced in the 1960s by the state government that grew into a sizeable fleet by the late 1970s—threatened their livelihoods, regularly invading the coastal waters,

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tale symptoms of cough and cold, assuming it was a familiar form of seasonal distress. His health suddenly deteriorated; he was hospitalised on October 5 and put on the ventilator. Despite the best medical attention, he died of multiple organ failure, brought on by COVID-19.

Peter's achievements emerged from humble beginnings. Born to Clarie and Thomas Bell in a fisher family in Valiya Veli, a coastal village at the edge of Thiruvananthapuram (earlier Trivandrum, the capital of the south Indian state of Kerala), Peter's childhood was spent in a small fishing community of the 1960s. He encountered the struggles of an occupation dependent on the vagaries of nature, the poverty of a community living on the edge of land and society.

Yet his memory was etched with the good old days—often the days

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reducing the local fish catch, cutting their nets, damaging the reefs in the area. The newly-formed Trivandrum District Fishworkers Union mobilized the fishing community into a massive and militant struggle against trawling, the likes of which had not been seen before.

Some of the organizers saw leadership potential in Peter at a youth training camp organized by the Programme for Community Organization (PCO), a local NGO that did pioneering work among the fishing community of Trivandrum. In no time, Peter was pulled into the struggle as one of the organizers. Their interventions included squatting on railway tracks and the first-ever blockade of the Trivandrum airport.

The first struggles of the Trivandrum fishers in 1980 caught the imagination of the fishing community across the Kerala coast, creating a statewide fisher movement against trawling that coalesced into the Kerala Swatantra Malsya Thozhilali Federation (KSMTF), an independent (non-party) trade union that was a network of local fishworker organizations. The KSMTF made waves

throughout the 1980s by virtue of its relentless anti-trawl movement. This eventually led to an experimental ban on trawling during the southwest monsoon period in 1988 and become a regular monsoon ban from 1991 onwards. A seasonal ban on mechanized boats eventually became the norm across the entire Indian coast when scientists and administrators, who had initially opposed the ban, became champions of the trawl ban.

Father Thomas (Tom) Kocherry, the leader of the Trivandrum Union, became a key figure in the Kerala fishworkers movement. He attracted and mentored a large number of young fishers. Which is how Peter, one of the most promising youngsters in that lot, became the trade union secretary, a role he performed with skill and dedication. Once KSMTF was reorganized as a unitary organization by the mid-1980s, Peter would continue as the secretary of its Trivandrum district unit. By the late 1980s, he became its sheet anchor. It was clear that Peter had made a permanent commitment to the fishworker movement and had dropped all career options. He had chosen the arduous path of full-time activism.

Over the next decade, he quietly managed the day-to-day running of the Trivandrum union, organizing innumerable protests and rallies with little fuss. From a token protests to large rallies of thousands, Peter created a system that delivered—planning, communicating issues to rank and file, mobilizing members, logistics, the media management—and all on a shoestring budget.

In a city where protest rallies are an everyday occurrence and the ordinary public quietly suffers the inconvenience without taking much notice of the protest itself, the fishworker protests always caught the public imagination. Led by a large proportion of fisherwomen and young people, the rallies were colourful and dynamic, guaranteed to attract attention. Trivandrum being the seat of administrative power in Kerala, all major state-level protests ended there. It all owed to Peter's coordination.

By the mid-1990s, Peter enjoyed state-wide importance. By the late 1990s, he had become KSMTF's strong man, a status he held till his death, irrespective of his formal position in the organization. Over the last two decades Peter had become the face and voice of small-scale fishworkers in Kerala. He was accepted across the spectrum by both left-wing and right-wing parties and by other fisher organizations and administrators. His mobile telephone number was invariably on the speed dial of journalists covering fisheries issues; TV channels routinely interviewed him on matters concerning the fishing community.

For over 20 years—remarkably—Peter published *Alakal*, the fortnightly Malayalam newspaper of KSMTF. He wrote much of the content and convinced others to write for it, collected advertisements and sponsorships, proofread the pages, and got it printed. Often, he also posted copies to the subscribers! The newspaper provided useful information and analysis to Kerala fishworkers. More importantly, it propounded KSMTF's views on important issues. He wasn't restricted to small-scale fishers, either, drawing a wider community consensus. Despite the conflict of interest, the trawl associations of Kerala respected Peter and were often willing to cooperate.

In 1987, when Kocherry took over NFF's leadership, Trivandrum became the nerve centre for the national movement. Peter was ever-dependable in the NFF. From the early 1990s, fishworker's issues became national in scope and required a coordinated effort by the member unions. Delhi became the centre of activity, posing a big challenge to NFF with its predominantly coastal membership. If Kocherry opened doors in Delhi using his forceful personality and larger-than-life image, Peter and others followed in his footsteps and developed their own contacts and networks, using those settled or working in Delhi and hailing from the coastal states.

Peter commanded respect for his rich experience and political acumen. Given his commitments in Kerala, his precarious finances and his unfamiliarity with English and Hindi, Peter did not aspire to a national role. But he had to take on a more active role in the NFF following the death of several towering leaders such as Harekrishna Debnath, Thomas Kocherry, Matanhy Saldanha and Rambhau Patil.

When an internal crisis forced him to take over as NFF's general secretary, his close personal relations with union leaders from other states was pivotal to his success. Many of them stayed with him when they visited Trivandrum and he, in turn, stayed with them when he visited their states/towns. This helped them transcend barriers of language and culture. Peter also mindful of the diversity of the NFF's base, stretched across a wide spectrum of fishing fleets, many of them in conflict with one another. Their leaders trusted Peter's non-partisan handling.

Peter quietly developed his language skills and taught himself to use modern information technology—computers, the Internet, social media.

Peter was using the COVID-induced break to work on many ideas and issues. He had ambitious plans to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the KSMTF from December 2020 to May 2021. He was all set to take the NFF forward on several fronts when he was taken away. ❧